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## Op Ed - Fiddling While Rome Burns

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# Fiddling While Rome Burns

by **Richard Abel** (1730 S. W. 90th Avenue, Portland, OR 97225)

I read *Against the Grain* and other library periodical literature swinging between growing senses of despair and dismay. The multiplying volume of literature addressing banal subject matter, the alarming objectives being proposed and the rapid intellectual approaches by which matters are being addressed is becoming increasingly dismaying. But even more staggering is that this sort of discourse is being carried on in a way that seems too often to deny that a service crisis in libraries either exists or is becoming progressively more acute. The writing in library periodicals is increasingly being conducted in some sort of a vacuum, set widely aside from the obvious realities of the growing failure of libraries to perform their critical role either at present or into the foreseeable future. The title of this piece, while historically incorrect but possessed of a long and well-understood cognitive meaning, was deliberately chosen to try to mirror the widening and deepening gulf between the concerns and objectives of librarians as expressed in the literature and the reality on their institutions' grounds. Libraries are progressively losing the war of their budgets for want of a clear, decisive, strategic thinking and the resolute marshaling of their diminishing resources to posture themselves strategically in such a way as to offer some hope of turning the tide of a presently losing battle. But rather than address critical strategic issues and develop the means to better position their organizations, librarians dither with technical minutiae, irrelevant politically correct social issues, and utopian theorizing.

Before proceeding further let me make it clear that I will tip my hat to no one in my regard for the value of libraries. I hold them, and have held them since childhood, as one of the small handful of genuinely critical institutions in any kind of worthwhile civilization. Witness: Every society lacking them presents a clear example of mean, Hobbesian primitivism. By the same token, I value the profession of librarianship as the cultural equivalent of those who nurture and educate each coming generation — right up there with motherhood and

apple pie, to make the matter as plain and simple as possible. (This said in the full knowledge that this piece is at the further risk of summary dismissal by those affecting the cynicism and negativism so broadly circulating in bookish circles these days.) In short, I was an unwitting believer in **Karl Popper's** concept of libraries as the custodians of those intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic artifacts which constitute the epistemological contents of the culture of which I was one of the fortunate heirs and which thereby confer upon libraries the ontological status and cultural centrality of the World War II years before either knew of or read anything of the man who may well prove to be the leading philosopher of this century. (*In his Objective Knowledge*, 1972)

So what follows is criticism of neither the library as a prime cultural institution nor of librarianship as a knowledge-promoting profession, but rather an effort to refocus library discourse on the strategic repositioning of libraries so that they are once again fully capable of discharging the near and long term cultural responsibilities with which they are charged in an advanced civilization. It is an attempt to redirect the thinking of at least some in the library profession from the continuing pursuit of a mannered, pretentious preoccupation with trivialities; the perpetual waltzing about with the same old, inconsequential notion of "information"; the repeated call for "studies" as a means of evading the problem; the continuing head-in-the-sand belief that nothing can be done about the root causes of the library crisis, so patched-together, intellectually shabby and unworthy linguistic lean-tos such as "resource sharing", "access", etc.; the never-ending, misguided search for any "enemy" outside the profession, and the academy rather than the real ones; the endless puffing of utopian solutions based upon one kind of fruitless technological fix after another; and the dizzying flights of quixotic fancy fueled by the fatuous desire for the "simple" solution to the hard and slow labor of developing and putting into place the radical strategic repositioning which today's circumstances virtually dictate — to put into place genuine solutions consistent with and flowing from the realities in which libraries now are embedded.

All of us connected in one way or another with libraries have been clearly confronted with the following realities. Not a single one of

the factors in the following listing (arranged in roughly chronological sequence) has been hidden from nor are they some piece of Gnostic lore known only by an anointed few.

## By the early 1960's it was known that:

1. Long-term support for a vastly-increased national R&D sector, largely based in academe, was virtually assured.
2. A comparably vast increase in the publication of research results, principally in journals but also in books, was following as a direct consequence of #1.
3. The volume of publication, particularly in journals, was being further augmented by the "publish or perish" principle of organizing both tenure and prestige in not just the university setting but the research environment at large.
4. The pattern of a radically larger percentage of the college and post college age population attending institutions of higher learning (not simply traditional colleges and universities, but trade schools and other private sector educational initiatives) was a permanent feature of the post-war society. While the bulge in the percentage of the population entering tertiary education was inaugurated by the WWII GI-Bill, contrary to then expectations this bulge developed into a permanent increase.
5. Institutions of higher learning increased vastly in size to accommodate the enormous increases in not only student and faculty numbers but in support of augmented research mandates. Academic libraries perforce increased in size and extent of holdings. Public libraries were also driven to increased size both by post-war population growth and the vast increases in use occasioned by the ever larger numbers of people involved in private sector or self-directed education.
6. The administration of higher learning was passing from scholars elevated to those ranks out of respect for their scholarly attainments to an emerging class of professional administrators. The earlier administrators had, like **Clark Kerr** of the **Univ. of California**, well understood the centrality of the library to the educational and scholarly enterprise. By contrast, most of the new professional administrative class saw the library as simply another claimant

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on the budget — and often as a financial “black hole” which sucked up all the money in its vicinity.

7. The number of young people entering the ranks of the library profession increased rapidly in response to the need to staff growing libraries. Most were trained in the technologies of the profession — cataloging, acquisitions, reference, circulation, etc. — along the lines that had served quite well in the days of the smaller library serving a smaller population, and as a consequence, so conceived of their work and professional compass.

8. The computer had proved a powerful tool for the storage and mind-numbing manipulation of vast amounts of data and in a few innovative institutions was already being bent to the manipulation of the data in libraries. These early, tentative excursions led to the firming conclusion that the computer was bound to play a central role in library operations.

### **By the late 1960's it was known that:**

1. Libraries were facing severe space problems. Here began the still ardent love affair with technological fixes. The first of these “saving” technologies was the micro-film or -fiche, which was to provide the answer. The library buildings of the time could readily accommodate all the books and journals required if they were reduced to micro-forms — and hang the users; they'd simply have to get used to such blurry text. This was merely the first of a long line of failed technological fixes, each touted as the answer to one or another difficult library problem. Articles on the virtues of micro-forms pre-empted the library literature then in the same way the “electronic future” does today.

2. Libraries singly, and subsequently when the real costs of “stand-alone” computerization became evident consortia, developed “in-house” operational systems — cataloging, circulation, journal check-in, etc. Although vendors prepared to either sell “off-the-shelf” software or install/manage systems that were about, it was argued that libraries best knew their own needs and besides “every library is different” so standard systems could never do the job in any particular setting. This “we'll do it ourselves because we know best” attitude has bedeviled libraries for decades. (None of these early systems vendors were ultimately commercially successful nor were they able to provide fully integrated systems, only significant elements there-of — as was also true of the in-house systems.)

3. As a consequence of the building and operation of computer-based operational systems “in-house,” a vast number of computer types were recruited to library staffs or, in those cases where a central institutional computing facility had been established, a cadre of the staff was assigned to the building and maintenance of the library system. Here is to be found the introduction of a group devoted

to the notion of “information” and the library as dealing in “information.” It should be noted that this term still possesses — after thirty years — no firm definition but rather a floating array of more-or-less vague meanings. Whatever, libraries were now ensnared in the “information” game with a portion of the staff invested in the notion.

4. The set of insular beliefs described in #2 above was the first revelation of the inadequacy of the professional training being offered by library schools.

5. The first “approval plan” system coupled with a “standing order for books in series” system which was readily adaptable to the collection particularities of individual libraries was put into place and offered to academic, research, and large public library systems. This was the second case of a successful global system based on the standardization of a basic library function. The first was the Library of Congress cataloging and card distribution services.

6. As the complexities and congestion in libraries increased, attributable to vast increases in use and holdings, a goodly number of libraries following the example of a few large libraries instituted one of the most effective devices created in this period — the hiving off of discrete specialized libraries to serve particular populations — emerged. Thus, satellite libraries, akin to the faculty libraries of European universities, were set up for academic departments removed from the main library as well as “undergraduate” or “college” libraries to serve the undergraduate population. The enormous value of these satellite libraries was put to librarians possessed of subject-specialized knowledge in direct, day-to-day contact with users and thus renewed the building of library

constituencies earlier lost in the exponential growth of libraries — holdings, faculties, and staff.

### **By the early 1970's it was known that:**

1. Despite massive increases in university budgets, library budgets as a percentage of total university budget were declining — each year by a greater fraction than the previous year. The library budget crisis was real — and the vague outlines of the magnitude of its devastation were becoming evident.

2. The “professionalization” and “bureaucratization” of the administrative staff was advancing out of all recognition. Not only was an increasing ratio of the university budget being consumed by this fraction, but the administrative staff was successfully asserting primary authority for all budgetary decisions. Libraries looked increasingly to the adminis-

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*This “we'll do it ourselves because we know best” attitude has bedeviled libraries for decades.*

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tration as not only the source of funds but their legitimation as well. The history of public libraries traced a similar and parallel trajectory and found them in an analogous position.

3. “In-house” library operational systems were beginning to show their age and required replacement. Increasing budgetary constraints compelled libraries to rethink their strategy for this replacement effort. The sheer cost of building “one-of-a-kind”, “stand-alone” systems — coupled with the expensive and painful consequences of diverting professional staff time from library functions to the planning, design, and building oversight functions

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associated with such undertakings — virtually dictated the purchase of commercial “off-the-shelf” software packages — and in the case of a handful of far-sighted libraries the contracting for their operation and maintenance as well. This move to “off-the-shelf” packages became the accepted way to go by the last half of the decade.

4. It had become clear by mid-decade that virtually all the library “backroom” functions — acquisitions, cataloging, fund accounting, journal renewal and check-in, etc. — could be purchased from a body of competitive vendors. The library “backroom” functions could be reduced to a selection and evaluation of vendor’s performance. So, the ability to acquire (the hot-button jargon is presently “outsourcing”) not only the traditional “backroom” functions but the more recent operational system functions were all readily available in a competitive marketplace and at a lesser cost.

5. The number of library schools began to decline as the demand for librarians fell. Many of those surviving changed their names from that of “library science” or some such to schools of “library and information science.” A cynic might comment that this change incorporated a muddled word in the very definition of function and reflected the muddle beginning to overtake libraries.

The story from the mid-1970s on has been one of short-sighted muddling through — re-allocating budget from books to journals, canceling journals, diverting already scarce funds to questionable, soon-to-be-obsolete electronic media or other technological fixes in the hopes that some kind of “information” imperative is being discharged — or simply ignoring the muddle by dealing in trivialities or diverting attention to irrelevant politically correct posturing or seeking out an “enemy,” usually among publishers or conjuring up slogans like “resource sharing” to cover up the mess of indulging in flights of fancy about “alternative” STM electronic publications, etc. Yes, a few reasonable voices keep speaking out — people like **Michael Gorman** (It would be useful to know how **Cal. State Un.** at Fresno has managed to attract such a string of superb librarians beginning with **Henry Madden** through the present Mr. Gorman.) — and often in prominent fora, but to little apparent avail.

The obvious question to be asked is: “Why do librarians seem so powerless to halt and then reverse the decline in budget and hence in service?” In reviewing the above admittedly brief outline of the history of the decisive 20-year period which gave rise to the muddle of the last 20 years, several trends leading to such an unhappy outcome are immediately evident.

1. The library profession was ill-trained to deal with the wholly new environment of exponential growth in size and clien-

tele in which it found itself. Knowledge and management skills, not technological skills, were what was needed.

2. The sheer demand of trying to keep up with this growth led the profession to focus inward on the business of simply getting the job done. It, therefore, failed in substantial measure to focus on its “core competency” (to use another jargon word), the efficient accumulation of knowledge products (books, journals, etc.) and its proficient and energetic supply of those products to its users/market in a “user friendly” manner.

3. By so doing, it not only failed to a greater or lesser degree to measure its performance in terms of its market performance but more importantly failed to maintain those close ties with its core constituencies which had for centuries marked the library/user/author complex.

4. The consequence of #2 and 3 above was that the character and reward system of the direct library governing authority changed radically. Libraries not only failed to attend quickly enough to the decisive change in their operating environment, but more importantly could summon few allies from among users to bring outside negotiating clout to the budget bargaining table. Libraries had, nor presently have, no groups of potentially aggrieved students or faculty insisting that the library budget be retained at previous relative levels.

If this analysis is close to correct, the broad course of action requisite to halt the continuing slide in service and enhance budget as well as get library affairs headed in the opposite direction only seems fairly clear.

1. Libraries should over the next few immediate years farm out as many of their “backroom” functions as possible.

2. The staff previously assigned to these functions should be retrained as subject specialists by supporting tuition and attendance time for additional training — not in schools of library and information science but in the appropriate academic departments on campus. Or, in the case of public librarians, in local colleges and universities. Librarians should, in short, once again become scholars whose specialty is a broad and in-depth knowledge of the historic literature and spacious acquaint-

tance with the current subject matter thereof.

3. This retrained staff should as quickly as possible be placed in “public service” roles to provide continuing and intense interaction with users. This augmented staff of subject specialists should come to be presented to and viewed by users as the first-line resource for any significant enterprise involving the library, not a sometimes-available line-of-last-resort by befuddled, frustrated and discouraged users.

4. One of the charges of the “public service” mission and staff should be to help form and maintain constituent groups prepared to assist the library in not only budget negotiations but in all cases where the administrative bureaucracy seems to be threatening the intelligent or long-term operation of the library.

5. The specifications for library operating systems — whether computer-based or manual — should be broadened to include a wide variety of performance measures not only to assist the library in better tracking the job being done but to provide the kind of “marketing” information the library needs to adapt to changing user needs.

6. Libraries should refocus collection policies along the lines urged **Michael Gorman** in his ALA address “To Net or Not to Net” and adapted in *ATG*, February, 1998, pp.40-42 (“A Plea for Balance”) as a matter of greatest urgency — and surely within a year or two.

The above are at best broad outlines of the radical strategic repositioning which should be undertaken. Enormous amounts of detailed planning must be worked out and put into place before such a repositioning can be affected, as a glance at any organization which has undertaken such strategic repositioning to its core competencies will readily demonstrate. The library literature should, in support of these initiatives, be carrying a steady stream of accounts of detailed programs aimed at fulfilling the larger objective of strategic repositioning as well as bibliographic studies and literature surveys aimed at the deepening of subject knowledge of literature specialists.

Such new and robust fare would offer a welcome change from the banal and predictably thin gruel now on offer. 🐷

## Interpreting Financial Statements

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